10. ON THE OCCURRENCE OF FINSCH'S STARLING (*STURNUS VULGARIS POLTARATSKYI* FINSCH) NEAR BOMBAY

On 29 November 1964, while shooting snipe at Rewas (across Bombay Harbour), Alibag Taluka, Kolaba District, Maharashtra, I saw a party of about a dozen starlings over marshy land. They settled on telegraph wires in front of my companion Krishna Talcherkar who, at my request, fired into them dropping four, a male and three females.

Stuart Baker in the FAUNA (**3** : 31 et seq.) accepted seven races from Indian limits, but only five of them are included in Ripley's SYNOPSIS (1961). Judged by their wing measurements [128-135 mm. (♂♂)], purplish heads and throats, and greenish upper- and underparts, the present birds are *Sturnus vulgaris poltaratskyi* Finsch (Type locality: Marka-Kul, Eastern Kazakhstan). This race is accepted as a common winter visitor to West Pakistan and northern India and, though specimens have been obtained at Madras (Whistler, *J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.* **36** : 587), it is said to be an uncommon straggler in Gujarat (Sálim Ali, *J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.* **52** : 796). There appears to be no earlier record of this species from the Bombay area.

75, ABDUL REHMAN STREET,
BOMBAY 3, HUMAYUN ABDULALI
December 8, 1964.

11. PLANTS EATEN BY *UROMASTIX MICROLEPIS* BLANFORD AND OTHER NOTES ON THIS LIZARD IN EASTERN ARABIA

It is a well-known fact that the spiny-tailed lizard (*Uromastix*) is herbivorous. The writer has seen many of these lizards during desert trips in eastern Arabia without, however, ever observing one in the act of feeding. Nor was much learned about their diet through observations of captive specimens, for of several lizards kept for weeks at a time all refused to eat anything in captivity.

Mr. Harry Alter and the writer made a trip inland from Dhahran on 7-8 May 1964; one of the purposes of the journey was to test the palatability of *Uromastix* as human food. Six specimens of *Uromastix microlepis* Blanford were taken between Niṭā (27° 13′N., 48° 25′E.) and Abwāb (26° 07′N., 48° 56′E.) on May 7-8 in the Wādi al Miyāh area, a low-lying region particularly favoured by this lizard. All of the spiny-tailed lizards reported from eastern Arabia have been of this species.

The last three taken by the writer on May 8 were collected 55 km. west of Al Lidām ('Jebel Dam'), where Gasperetti took a specimen (CAS 84430) in 1946 that was subsequently presented to the California Academy of Sciences (Haas 1957). The writer identified the following plant species from fragments in the stomach contents of the six specimens :

1. *Astragalus gyzensis* Del. (Leguminosae) : leaves and pods
2. *Citrullus colocynthis* (L.) Schrad. (Cucurbitaceae) : a few seeds
3. Gramineae : one grass spikelet, not identified (*Aristida plumosa* L. is common in the area)
4. *Horwoodia dicksoneae* Turrill (Cruciferae) : flowers and (probably) leaves
5. *Launaea capitata* (Spreng.) Dandy (Compositae) : leaves and flower buds
6. *Moltkiopsis ciliata* (Forsk.) Johnst. (syn. *Lithospermum callosum* Vahl (Boraginaceae) : leaves and flowers
7. *Neurada procumbens* L. (Rosaceae) : leaves and fruits
8. *Plantago boissieri* Hausskn. et Bornm. (syn. *P. albicans* L. : Plantaginaceae) : leaves and flowers.

Several of the lizards killed were females that contained large yellow masses of ovarian eggs. The testes in the males appeared to be enlarged and active.

It was noted that specimens seen early in the morning shortly after sunrise were quite dark in colour—a dark slate-grey. The lizards were extremely wary at this time and seldom ventured further than a few yards from their burrows, diving into their holes at the slightest disturbance. As the morning wore on and the temperature increased, all the lizards seen became lighter in colour. By midday they were nearly white to bright yellow. Similar colour changes have been reported for *Uromastix loricatus* (Blanford) in Iran (Anderson 1963), and Schmidt-Nielsen (1964) has discussed the significance of colour changes in controlling the body temperature of desert reptiles.

Most of the writer's specimens were taken at midday, when the lizards' behaviour had changed almost as remarkably as their colour. At this time they ventured far from their burrows, sometimes to a distance of several hundred yards and were, contrary to expectation, easily approached on foot. They lay motionless and moved in many cases only after being touched ; then they were off for the burrow at a speed that could be matched by a running man only with great effort. All of the specimens killed had full or nearly full stomachs. The lizards apparently feed before noon and then lie in the sun at some distance from their holes, depending on their motionless state and light colour for protection. The general boost in metabolism provided by the noonday heat may be an aid to the digestive process.

Uromastix (Arabic *ḍabb*, pl. *ḍubbān*) is a fairly common element in the diet of many Bedouin Arabs, and specimens are occasionally sold alive in the markets for food. The whole carcass is usually roasted in the skin by burying in hot coals, although most of the meat is found in the tail and hind legs. Any eggs found are put back into the abdominal cavity to roast or are enclosed in the cleaned stomach for steaming. The writer and a companion roasted the tails and hind legs of two specimens and found the flesh tasty, if somewhat fibrous, and stringy. There is no 'gamey' flavour; it tastes more like somewhat tough lamb than the chicken or fish to which it has been compared. Some portions of the tails were overdone, and the burned horny scales imparted an unpleasant flavour to the underlying meat. Boiling or roasting after skinning thus might be preferred. *Uromastix* is found over wide areas in the Saharo-Sindian desert region and is fairly easy to capture. It should be considered a primary survival food source for this area.

Arabian Affairs Division,
Arabian American Oil Company, J. MANDAVILLE
Dhahran, Saudi Arabia,
January 10, 1965.

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12. OCCURRENCE OF THE SUNFISH *RANZANIA TRUNCATA* (RETZIUS) NEAR VERAVAL, ALONG GUJARAT COAST[1]

On 12 May 1963, an uncommon fish was caught off Jaleshwar village, about 2 miles north of Veraval, by fishermen operating a gill-net in about 30 metres depth of water. Not having seen this type of fish before, they brought it to this office for identification and it was identified as the sunfish *Ranzania truncata*.

Deraniyagala (*J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.* **44**: 429) and Chacko & Mathew (*J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.* **53**: 724) have recorded *Ranzania truncata* from Ceylon waters and Beypore (Malabar coast) respectively.

[1] Published with the permission of the Superintending Engineer, Deep Sea Fishing Station, Bombay.